

Lent 5A Sermon 030908
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

When someone joins the military, they have to go through basic training, or boot camp, before they can begin their advanced training and actually become a functioning soldier, sailor, airman or marine. As everyone who has been through it knows, and even as people who've only seen it in movies have an idea, the process is not pleasant. It is, however, necessary. Before a raw recruit can be transformed into a useful member of the military, that person must first have his or her belief system broken down so that the military system can be put in its place. This is the most stark and obvious example of the systems of deconstruction and reconstruction.

Deconstruction/reconstruction – they happen in all walks of life, and they happen all our lives. When we enter school for the first time, we must have our system of understanding molded to that of our kindergarten, because most of us don't go to school for the first time from a home that operates like a classroom. The same is true if we join a team sport or scouting. Then it's off to college and a completely new system has to be learned in order for us to function properly, and this is also true of the workplace. No two are alike and we have to learn the system – which include un-learning some things – before we can really get into the groove of a place.

That's the process we've been going through, to some small extent, during our Wednesday evening Lenten series and in our Wednesday morning Bible study. We've been questioning what we know of the Bible and faith issues – deconstructing them, if you will – so that we can begin to look at our faith, and Holy Scripture through new and fresh eyes and see what God might be telling us today that we've never heard before.

Now some will tell you that deconstructing the Bible is (at the least) dangerous and at the worst is work for heretics. After all, critically looking at the Bible can cause doubts about the factuality individual stories or teachings and doubts in small things can grow into doubts about bigger things. As I read recently,

- ✦ Doubts about a real ark filled with smelly animals can lead to
- ✦ Doubts about a real dry land crossing at the Red Sea, which can lead to
- ✦ Doubts about the walls of Jericho falling down at the sound of trumpets, which can lead to
- ✦ Doubts about God's active involvement in the life of Israel, which can lead to
- ✦ Doubts about God's new covenant in the person of Jesus Christ, which can lead to
- ✦ Doubts about the place of Jesus in history, which can lead to
- ✦ Doubts about the relevance of the Bible itself in the microchip-paced world of the 21st century¹.

Such doubting – such deep questioning of all of the details of the Bible and its witness to God's work in the world – is a very Episcopalian and very Anglican activity. But it is a pastime for people who have the time and inclination to devote to it. It is a great intellectual and educational endeavor that can lead to much deeper

¹ Homiletics online, March 24, 1996

faith over time, a faith of understanding. But when faith in action is needed, we must put such intellectual activity aside and fall back on that which we *know* on a very elemental level. When we need to jump into action in the name of God, we must do so from a well of faith that is deep and unquestioning within us – the faith that comes from *experiencing* the power of God in our lives. Martha, in today’s Gospel story, is someone who exhibits that sort of faith in action.

Jesus intentionally waits until after Lazarus – the brother of Mary and Martha – has died, so that Lazarus’ “healing” will be something more startling than the healings He has already performed. Remember last week we read about Jesus making mud and putting it on the blind man’s eyes. It was the making of the mud that got him in trouble with the Pharisees. He made mud on the Sabbath, which was work and therefore forbidden. Jesus made that conflict possible by making the mud. Today we hear about Him doing something else that the Scribes and the Pharisees won’t be able to ignore – or deconstruct. Jesus knows that God will have to raise Lazarus from the dead, through Him, when He arrives in Bethany. This is an event that the Scribes and the Pharisees will *not* be able to ignore and it will push them closer to the final confrontation with Jesus. And it will make people *know* who He is.

But as He approaches Bethany, Martha comes running out to Jesus. She says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” That is a great statement of faith. “Lord, I *know*,” that Lazarus would be alive if you had come when he was sick.

“I *know* you could have healed him if you’d been here.” But her faith goes even deeper. She then tells Jesus, “But even now *I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him,*” the obvious implication being, “I *know* that you can bring my brother back from the dead if you want.” Have you ever *known* something that deeply and absolutely? The kind of faith that Martha exhibits in this story can only come from experience.

We can *know* something because we have read it in a book or heard it from some educational source. Or we can *know* something because someone we trust tells us about it, as when someone says, “When old Joe tells you something, you can take it to the bank.” But to really know something deeply – to have absolute faith in it – usually requires an experience. Martha had that experience of God’s power in the form of Jesus. She had been with Him and had seen and experienced Him in action through much of His ministry. And unlike the often thick-headed male disciples, she *knew* what Jesus was capable of. That’s why she could tell Him, with full knowledge of the implications, “I know that (Lazarus) will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” And when Jesus tells her, “No. I mean that I will raise Him from the dead today, do you believe that?” She is able, in complete faith, to respond, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Martha’s example is certainty – but questioning can also be faithful. The Anglican understanding of what the ability to reason means is that God has given us the gift of a mind which is capable of learning and understanding, and with that gift comes the

responsibility of using the gift for the glory of God. The great Anglican Theologian, Richard Hooker, in his famous series, The Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie, put forward the middle way between the unquestioning Roman Catholicism of his day and the “toss out the baby with the bathwater,” faith of 16th Century Puritanism. Hooker said that we should interpret Scripture in its context, because, “Words must be taken according to the matter whereof they are uttered²” So we, Episcopalians, understand that it is our responsibility to question what God is saying in Scripture, but it also our responsibility to put our faith into action.

God calls us to question what we read and are told about the Bible and about God’s work in the world, in order to deepen our understanding of God and to hone that understanding as much as we possibly can. But each and every time we are faced with putting our faith into action, we are called to jump up, as Martha did, and run out into the world, relying upon our experience of God’s grace and love.

Martha experienced Jesus’ power first-hand. Her faith was made rock solid because she witnessed God actively working in the world through Jesus, and she was transformed. But we also see God’s power at work in the world through Jesus every day. And we are called to pay attention to those examples and to deepen our faith as a result of them. I’ve seen people metaphorically, and almost literally, resurrected from Intensive Care Unit beds. I’ve seen them walk from hospital rooms that were predicted to be tombs, just as

² Hooker, Richard, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* (1593 - 1662) Book IV.11.7

Lazarus did. Those miraculous resurrections are faith makers, for sure. But what about the yearly resurrection of the earth from its death in winter to its new birth in Spring? What about the resurrection of a disabled family unit when its members reconcile with each other? What about the new birth of a new job after the economic death of a layoff or downsizing? Those are miraculous resurrections as well – just as much caused by God as was Lazarus’ appearance and just as much a part of God’s gracious love for us as was returning their brother to Mary and Martha.

St. Augustine said that miracles aren’t contrary to nature, they’re only contrary to our knowledge of nature. Resurrection is not something against the laws of God’s created order, it’s only against our understanding of God’s created order. God wants us to question, but we’ll never know all the answers. Some things we just have to take on faith. Like resurrection.

Amen.